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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the classroom interactions between students and instructors of different cultural backgrounds and offers insights as to how instructors might maximize their effectiveness with diverse groups. Inspired by the lived experiences of an African-American graduate student in a department staffed predominantly by European-American faculty members, the paper calls upon instructors to create an environment conducive to learning by employing a variety of teaching strategies which acknowledge the unique learning styles of students. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/NKA)

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Diversity Issues in Teaching: Cultural Sensitivity in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the classroom interactions between students and instructors of different cultural backgrounds and to offer insight as to how instructors might maximize their effectiveness with diverse groups. Inspired by the lived experiences of an African-American graduate student in a department staffed predominantly of European-American faculty members, this paper calls instructors to create an environment conducive to learning by employing a variety of teaching strategies which acknowledge the unique learning styles of students.

Diversity Issues in Teaching: Cultural Sensitivity in the Classroom

Since the start of graduate school, I have faced a number of challenges. One of these is the pressure to self-disclose more than I feel comfortable sharing. My attempts to gracefully decline requests for information about my personal life, including who I am dating, have resulted in far more of an *issue* than I ever would have imagined. Throughout the course of my first semester as a graduate student, one of my professors repeatedly told me "many people in the department," as she said, did not know how to approach me because I was too private. She went as far as calling me "different" and implied that my behavior was due to a personality flaw, completely refusing to examine the situation from a cultural perspective. Being the only African-American communication instructor and graduate student at a Midwestern university's main campus, among more than 20 faculty members and many students, I was confident that the conflict was due to cultural differences. This professor, who had designated herself spokesperson for the department, said I could not attribute my behavior to my cultural background because it was not necessarily consistent with that of other African-Americans. Knowing my own cultural upbringing far better than this European-American woman, I would like to respectfully disagree with her on the grounds that the research is contrary to her assertions. Dace (1994) cited Kochman, 1981, as saying:

> "Blacks resist information-seeking probes not simply for reasons of etiquette but because, as a minority group, they have been and continue to be vulnerable to the way such information might be interpreted and used.... Were blacks-as well as other socially vulnerable populations-better able to influence or control the way information about them is officially interpreted and used, this would not be the case" (p. 25).

Affirming the findings of Dace and Kochman, Corsini and Fogliasso (1997) added:

> "African-Americans both control information concerning subjects they consider personal, and are circumspect when inquiring about information that may be considered personal to others" (p. 41).

Dace (1994) concluded that African-Americans do not self-disclose because the information is either misinterpreted or their experiences are denied or diminished by people of the dominant culture. By denied, Dace means members of the dominate culture question the truth of the stories or they diminish the importance of them by telling stories that they view as being worse. When African-Americans sense that others are only partially committed to listening and understanding, they stop self-disclosing and are hesitant to attempt it again with these same individuals in the future. Dace specifically reported that European-Americans expect African-Americans to trust and disclose information early on in relationships and are disappointed when this does not happen. When pressured to self-disclose, African-American tell European-Americans what they want to hear, which may or may not be the truth. True self-disclosure from African-Americans to European-Americans does not take place until European-Americans consistently demonstrate that they are trustworthy (Collier & Powell, 1990; Dace, 1994; Orbe, 1994).

While this experience was not directly related to teaching, it significantly influenced my participation and ability to learn in this professor's class. My unwillingness to share personal experiences in this class of six in which the professor often disclosed intimate details of her life was interpreted as a personal attack against her. In my mind I was simply being myself and functioning within guidelines often employed by members of my culture. This misunderstanding

has resulted, so far, in a painful journey through my graduate program, and unfortunate experiences like these are bound to continue if students and educators are not aware of cultural differences. The purpose of this paper is to examine from a research perspective the differences in learning styles of students from different backgrounds. I will approach this topic by analyzing how individuals experience the classroom and making suggestions for instructors interested in creating an environment that all students will find to be conducive to learning.

Explanation of Terms

As stated by Allen (1995), diversity "encompasses a variety of personal and social bases of identity, including race-ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, country of origin, etc." (p.144). This definition is affirmed by Cox (1994), Ferris, Frink, Bhawuk, Zhou, and Gilmore (1996), Golembiewski (1995), and Orbe (1997). Moore (1993-4) asserted that diversity also includes physical abilities and qualities, educational background, marital status, military experience, parental status, as well as work experience. I acknowledge the multitude of ways to define *diversity*. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on racial diversity because it has been most salient for me, attempting to identify the different ways cultural groups experience classes. I am extrapolating from Locke's (1992) definition of cultural groups by defining it as clusters of people who share the same customs, norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Instead of using the widely known word *minority* to refer to non-European-American cultural groups, I will refer to them as members of a co-culture. I do this, as does Orbe (1997), to move away from terminology such as "minority," "underrepresented," "sub-groups," etc., which can imply that members of co-cultures are inferior to those of a dominant group.

Review of the Literature

Many researchers agreed that the typical classroom in the United States is conducted from a European-male perspective (Adams, 1992; Anderson & Adams, 1992; Collett & Serrano, 1992; Collier & Powell; Jenkins & Baine, 1991; Villegas, 1991). This approach is not conducive to learning for non-European-American students, nor does it adequately prepare European-American students for a society and workplace that is, according to scholars (Collett & Serrano, 1992; Moore, 1993-4), becoming more and more diverse. Adams (1992) argued that European-Americans who function only in their own culture throughout their educational careers fail to realize that their customs and values are culturally-based, and they regard individuals who are different from them as deviating from the norm. Therefore, they often take an ethnocentric stance on issues because they have not been challenged to view the world otherwise.

Approaching classes only from a European perspective has made institutes of higher education uncomfortable places for many members of co-cultural groups, which Collett and Serrano (1992) concluded contributes to their not performing up to their potential or to their dropping out. This may indicate a link between learning styles and race, but research has not proven that a direct link exists; however, it does show a correlation between the two (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Lieberman, 1997). Human beings have the same cognitive components, but studies have shown that they use them differently when interpreting and remembering information (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Lieberman, 1997). This difference in the interpretation of information leads to varying styles of learning.

Instructors usually teach in the styles they have been trained in, which Lieberman (1997) said is most often the Eurocentric, left-brain approach in the United States. Instructors with this style tend to interpret information from a logical perspective, focusing very little on feelings and

emotions. They are intolerant of ambiguity, impulsive, and individualistic. Non-European-American students, with the exception of Asian-American students, usually do not learn this way. Many of them, especially African-Americans and Latino-Americans, are right-brained learners. They are reflective, tolerant of ambiguity, and collectivistic, and they are challenged to adapt their learning styles to fit the styles of instructors. This results in missing significant portions of material covered in class. Furthermore, "U.S. students retain 10 percent of what they read; 26 percent of what they hear; 30 percent of what they see; 50 percent of what they see and hear; 70 percent of what they say; and 90 percent of what they say as they do something" (Lieberman, p. 198). This indicates that an approach incorporating left- and right-brain learning is needed for optimum results.

Instructors can adapt their teaching to fit the needs of their students when they become cognizant of the fact that learning occurs in a cultural context (Marchesani & Adams, 1993; Villegas, 1991). Recognizing the diversity within groups and acknowledging that people do not possess all characteristics generally associated with their cultures, Locke (1992) offered guidelines that may be helpful when communicating which different groups. He said African-Americans tend to look at the big picture, prefer deductive reasoning, and approximate time, numbers, and space. They seek justice and fairness in situations and typically focus on people, not things (collectivists). Jenkins and Bainer (1991) added that they are motivated by course work that is relevant at the present time or in the future.

According to Locke (1992) Native-Americans generally do not worry about time or gaining or losing material possessions. They highly respect elders and live in harmony with each other. They value silence, using it often to reflect on questions before answering them. They have difficulty accepting help from non-Native Americans; therefore, they may be reluctant to ask

instructors for assistance.

Also originating from a collectivist culture, Locke (1992) said Asian-Americans generally value service and work for the good of their people. They use indirect communication (low-context culture) in an effort to maintain social harmony. They show high regard for authority (high power distance) and often do not raise their hands to ask questions in class because such a gesture may be construed as their implying that instructors are not doing their jobs effectively. Finally, they are future-oriented, believe suffering builds character, and compete academically.

Latino-Americans are typically people and family-oriented, viewing work only as a means for survival. They focus on the present and place little value on punctuality. They consider overt expressions of disagreement and direct eye contact to senior citizens to be rude. They value interdependence and human contact and are sensitive to their environment (Locke, 1992).

On the other hand, European-Americans tend to be self-reliant, aggressive, competitive, inquisitive, and independent. They feel comfortable challenging authority (low-power distance), and Jenkins and Bainer (1991) said they are motivated by course work they perceive as being relevant to their lives today.

These characteristics of the different cultural groups should serve only to assist instructors when communicating cross-culturally. They are not a substitute for getting to know students personally, acknowledging differences in gender, age, socioeconomic statuses, and abilities. Instructors need to be informed of cultural backgrounds because they "affect attitudes, beliefs and values about education, ideas about how classes ought to be conducted, how students and teachers ought to interact, and what types of relationships are appropriate for students and teachers" (Collier & Powell, 1990, p. 334).

Further differentiating between the groups, instructors need to know that students interpret their actions differently, and these nonverbal behaviors from instructors significantly influence students' classroom experiences. Collier and Powell (1990) refer to these nonverbal cues as *teacher immediacy*, which indicates closeness and willingness to communicate. Instructor's eye contact, smiling, physical proximity, touch, relaxed posture, and vocal expressiveness measure teacher immediacy. The authors suggested that instructors who are *immediate* are effective with many students because they create learning environments that are non-threatening and comfortable. For African-Americans, immediacy is considered to be reflective of the instructor's opinions of them. Instructors who want to establish trust with African-American students need to sustain immediacy, particularly expressiveness when communicating. In addition, they need to know that African-Americans build trust slowly with European-American instructors, especially after encountering negative stereotyping and discrimination. The authors of this study also said African-Americans rate instructors highly if they consider them role models.

Collier and Powell (1990) evaluated the patterns of other groups as well. They said Asian-Americans rate instructors as effective if they help motivate and support students and if they provide clear instructions on class assignments. Easy-to-follow instructions tend to reduce anxiety for individuals who have a low tolerance for ambiguity. In addition to that, these students prefer instructors they view as role models. For Latino-Americans, immediacy is most important at the beginning of a course, with supportiveness being the most valued quality. Immediacy is a salient characteristic of teachers they rate as effective because they tend to be relationship-oriented. On the other hand, European-Americans find clarity and use of time to be most effective. Immediacy influences how they view the content of the course and the instructor's ability to teach it.

Continuing to identify cultural differences, Lieberman (1997) reported that Japanese and Native-American students are used to long wait periods in order to reflect and give the right answers to questions. Native-Americans find it more shameful to give wrong answers than to not answer at all. Japanese-American students are embarrassed to give wrong answers but are used to instructors allowing them to save face. Instructors do this by not directly telling students their answers are wrong, but by calling on someone else for the answer.

The behavior of Japanese and Native-American students is consistent with the way Lieberman (1997) said students from collectivist and high-power distance cultures, such as China, conduct themselves in class. These students are used to classrooms in which students talk only when called on by instructors, and they do not question teachers during class. Students request assistance after class so as not to publicly question the teachers' expertise. In contrast to that, Lieberman asserted that students from low-power distance and individualistic cultures speak up in class without being called on, and they readily debate issues with the other students and their instructors. Instructors who compare the behaviors of these students to that of the quieter students often incorrectly assume silent students as unintelligent or incompetent, according to Villegas (1991).

These misinterpretations are evident to students whether they are able to talk about them or not, and they adversely affect student performance. For this reason, Jenkins and Bainer (1991) concluded that instructors need to be aware that their interactions with students convey the expectations they hold of them. Unfortunately, instructors tend to hold different expectations for co-cultural groups than they do for dominant groups members, and their attitudes inadvertently come out during class. Allen (1995) reported an excellent example of this. She said an African-American student recalled being told "You are so articulate" (p. 146) upon completion of a

speech. This student interpreted this comment to mean: *You are so articulate for an African-American*. Obviously this student was not expected to have mastered the use of Standard English, and this hidden prejudice surfaced in the form of what might have been intended as an innocent remark. This comment and others like it are insulting and certainly do not create a climate conducive to learning. Instructors often are not aware that they hold such prejudices, but a careful evaluation of their interactions and thoughts about students may help them identify areas that are problematic.

In response to the variety of ways students learn, instructors truly committed to helping them develop their skills need to adopt flexible teaching styles that enhance the learning of all students. Many researchers agree that the keys to accomplishing this are a supportive climate (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Collett & Serrano, 1992; Marchesani & Adams, 1993; Orbe, 1995) and inclusive curricula (Locke, 1992; Marchesani & Adams, 1993). Describing the need for a supportive environment, Orbe (1995) asserted that learning does not truly take place in a classroom until a sense of true community is established. He draws from the work of Peck, 1987, to define community as "a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together and to delight in each other, [and to] make others' conditions [their] own" (p. 29). Peck characterizes community as being comprised of inclusiveness, commitment, consensus, contemplation, vulnerability, and graceful fighting. These characteristics are ones that create an atmosphere in which students find it safe to communicate. It is safe because students sense a basic acceptance of who they are. They trust that regardless of the difficulty of the road ahead, their instructors and fellow students will not give up on them. Students know that differences of opinion are recognized in efforts to

achieve consensus which, at times, means agreeing to disagree. They assist their instructors in constantly reflecting on what the group represents and taking action to stop personal biases from creeping into the classroom. Students feel comfortable self-disclosing because the instructors make themselves vulnerable as well. Finally, students recognize that conflict is inevitable, and they trust that disagreements will be dealt with in a constructive manner.

Furthermore, Collett and Serrano (1992) reported that effective instructors take advantage of opportunities to emphasize similarities between cultures. Instructors who acknowledge similarities, view cultural differences as strengths, and draw upon students' resources, tend to communicate more effectively with students (Villegas, 1991). However, Allen (1995) cautioned instructors to proceed carefully when relying on students for information. She said students should not be expected to be experts on *all* issues concerning their race. This area is a touchy one for instructors who simply do not know where to draw the line, but again, getting to know students will help instructors determine when, how, and if to direct questions to them. All of these strategies help create a sense of community and the kind of support that fosters optimum learning; however, it is not easily obtained, nor maintained.

The first step toward creating a supportive climate is to know your teaching style and the cultural biases you bring to the classroom (Jenkins & Bainer, 1991; Lieberman, 1997; Locke, 1992; Marchesani & Adams, 1993). After a self-assessment, instructors need to advance to the next level by becoming knowledgeable of world events and how they affect people of different cultures. This may seem time consuming for instructors who already feel swamped, but instructors who opt not to do this may end up spending more time inside and outside of the classroom trying to address conflicts that may never have arisen had they been aware of cultural differences. This increased awareness will assist instructors in understanding the underlying

causes of their students' behaviors, giving them an edge on tailoring course work to meet student needs.

Awareness within the classroom is also critical to establishing a supportive environment and successfully creating a multicultural classroom. Sadker and Sadker (1992) advised instructors to monitor their classroom behavior, noticing which groups they paid more attention and making a conscience effort to include everybody. It is important to have participation from all students in some form, even those reluctant to talk. Orbe (1995) gets participation from quieter students by having the class spend the last five minutes of the period writing down questions or comments about class that day so he can address them at the start of the following period. This strategy for silent students can be coupled with Sadker and Sadker's recommendation to allow ample wait time for students to respond to questions. Instructors may want to wait at least five seconds for easy questions and longer for more difficult ones. In addition to that, the authors suggested walking around the room to help ensure that quieter students are seen and acknowledged.

Also seeking to create a supportive environment, Orbe has employed a variety of strategies. They have ranged from creative ways for students to learn each other's names to group work illustrating the importance of interdependency. Other researchers, such as Collett and Serrano (1992), have highlighted the significance of learning the names of students and have warned against the common practice of changing some students' names to ones more easily pronounced (known as Anglicizing). This can communicate a lack of appreciation for students and an unwillingness to value their cultures. Many instructors mean no harm when they do this, but learning to call students by their names is generally regarded as a sign of respect.

Marchesani and Adams (1993) called instructors to go beyond getting non-English names correct and including literature from a few co-cultural authors -- which, by the way, needs to be genuinely integrated from other cultures, not merely added for the sake of being politically correct. They stated that instructors need to carefully review their entire course content and look for implicit and explicit biases against other cultures. This, admittedly, is not an easy task, but it is one that must be accomplished for the good of all students.

While these strategies may offer some assistance for those instructors making the transition to a more inclusive teaching style, the list is certainly not exhaustive. A multitude of other strategies can be utilized, and instructors should not rely only on one. Orbe (1995) reported that a combination of teaching strategies is necessary for students to reach their maximum potential. Jenkins and Bainer (1991) advised instructors to get started by examining classroom interactions during the first few weeks of class to make sure all students have the opportunity to participate. An atmosphere such as this one can be achieved by the following: asking members from dominant and co-cultural groups similar questions during class discussion, giving adequate wait time for responses (five seconds for easy questions and more time for challenging ones), establishing eye contact with co-cultural members and dominant members after asking the class questions, showing attentiveness to all students when they respond to questions, and giving similar feedback to all groups when they make comparable contributions (Jenkins & Bainer, 1991).

Locke (1992) followed up those suggestions with recommendations for instructors to know their own cultures well enough to identify the biases they bring to the class, eliminating behaviors that suggest prejudice or racism. He advised instructors to hold high expectations of co-cultural groups as well as students from the dominant group and to remember that students

are individuals in addition to being members of their cultural groups. Instructors striving to increase their effectiveness should also take advantage of opportunities to participate in community activities by diverse groups and encourage their departments to implement practices that acknowledge diversity among students.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the interactions between students and instructors of different backgrounds. It attempted to offer insight as to how different cultural groups experience the classroom as well as to provide solutions for instructors seeking to maximize their effectiveness. Overall, instructors were encouraged to establish a climate in which all students feel comfortable, starting by identifying their own teaching styles and the biases they bring to the classroom. Acknowledging the difficulty of conducting class in a culturally inclusive manner, this study urged instructors to accept the challenge because it will serve to enhance their teaching skills and foster an environment conducive to learning.

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